

First Contact

by Timothy Zahn

With a last sizzle of jittering repulsorlifts, the space yacht Uwana Buyer settled down into the landing field that had been hacked out of the Varonat jungle. "What a fine, civilized-looking place this is," Quelev Tapper commented, peering out the cockpit canopy. "You sure we didn't overshoot and land in someone's weed dump?"

Talon Karrde looked out at the pale yellow trees encircling the field and the thirty or so dilapidated buildings

nestled in beneath them. "No, this is it," he assured his lieutenant. "The Great Jungle of Varonat. Home of a handful of third-rate trading depots and a few thousand colonists who haven't the brains to pick up and go elsewhere."

"And an ugly Krish named Gamgalon," Tapper said. "I don't know, Karrde. I still think we should have brought in the Wild Karrde and Starry Ice and had some decent firepower behind us. We're kind of like sitting mynocks here."

"We're here to observe, not make trouble," Karrde reminded him, popping his restraints and standing up. "Gamgalon wouldn't be bothering with these private Morodin-hunting safaris if there wasn't some big profit involved. I just want to know what he's up to, and whether we can carve a piece of it off for ourselves."

"All the more reason to have backup along," Tapper grumbled, checking the draw of his blaster as he followed Karrde to the hatchway aft. "But you're the boss."

"How very true. You ready?"

Tapper took a deep breath, exhaled it noisily. "Let's do it."

Karrde punched the control and the hatchway slid up into the hull. Sniffing at the exotic aromas, he and Tapper walked down the ramp and headed across the field toward a building with a faded Port Facilities sign hanging on it.

They were no more than halfway there when two men lounging beside another of the buildings peeled themselves away from their wall and moved casually to intercept the newcomers. "Howdy," one of them said as they got within earshot. "Welcome to Tropis-on-Varonat. Here for the sights?"

"That's very amusing," Karrde complimented him.

"No, we're here for the hyperdrive mechanic we very much hope you have."

"Ah," the other said, glancing back at the Uwana Buyer.

"Yeah, I'm not surprised. The flashier the hull, the more crumbish the innards."

"Save the colorful language for the tourists," Tapper growled. "You have a hyperdrive mechanic here or don't you?"

The other eyed him a moment, then turned back to Karrde. "Your friend's a little short on manners," he said.

"He makes up for it in ability," Karrde said, pulling a handful of high-denomination coins from his pocket and sorting ostentatiously through them. "And in the understanding of schedules. We have some highly important business waiting for us on Svivren."

"Sure, I understand," the other said. "No offense, ah -- ?"

"Syndic Pandis Hart of the Sif-Uwana Council," Karrde identified himself. "This is my pilot, Captain Seoul." He chose one of the coins, held it up. "And we're rather in a hurry."

"Hey, no problem," the man grinned, jerking a thumb toward the port facilities building as he deftly took the coin from Karrde's hand. "Buzzy, go tell 'em they've got a customer. Rush job."

His companion nodded silently and loped off toward the building. "Name's Fleck, Syndic," the man continued. "Offhand, I'd say you're going to be stuck here for a few days. Got any plans?"

Karrde glanced pointedly around. "Would there be any plans worth having?"

"Matter of fact, there would," Fleck said. "Fellow here runs a pretty neat safari out into the jungle -- got a trip heading out first thing tomorrow morning, in fact. Ever hear of Morodins?"

"I don't think so," Karrde said. "Big game?"

"The biggest," Fleck assured him. "Giant lizard-slug things, ten to twenty meters long. Make great wall or hallway trophies." His lip twitched sardonically. "They're not too fast or mean, either. Good way for a beginner to start."

"That's comforting to hear." Karrde looked at Tapper.
"What do you think, Seoul?"

"Doesn't sound too dangerous, sir," Tapper said with just the right note of concern. "I trust you wouldn't be going alone?"

"Naw, there's four other hunters signed up," Fleck said. "And the boss always takes a couple of escorts along as guards. Safe as in a snuggy."

"I'd still recommend I accompany you, sir," Tapper persisted. "I used to be pretty good with a BlasTech A280."

"Let's find out first how much it costs to be as safe as in a snuggy," Karrde said dryly.

"Hardly anything," Fleck sniffed. "Not to a gentleman of your means. Only twelve thousand each."

Karrde smiled. "A man of means doesn't stay there by throwing money away. Fifteen thousand for the both of US."

Fleck grinned. "Hard bargainer, huh? Make it twenty."

"Experienced businessman," Karrde corrected. "Make it seventeen."

The other's forehead wrinkled, then cleared. "All right. Seventeen it is."

"Very good," Karrde said. "When do we leave?"

"Five-half tomorrow morning," Fleck said. "Just be here -- I'll tell the boss you're coming. Don't forget to bring the seventeen." He pointed across the field. "You can get outfitted over at that building over there, and get a room for the night in the hotel next door. It's, uh, nicer inside than it looks."

"One would hope so," Karrde agreed. "I trust no one will be offended if we pass on the accommodations. The outfitters will know what equipment we'll need?"

"Sure," Fleck nodded. "Like I said, the boss runs these safaris all the time."

"Very good," Karrde said. "Come, Seoul, let's go see what they have to offer."

Varonat's sun was beginning to settle down behind the jungle by the time Karrde and Tapper finally made it back to the Uwana Buyer with their purchases. "I hope we gave them enough time," Tapper commented as they climbed up the ramp.

"I'm sure we did," Karrde said. "It doesn't take long for a professional to search a ship this size. And I'm not expecting Gamgalon to be employing amateurs."

Abruptly, Tapper touched Karrde's arm. "Maybe he is," he said, dropping his voice.

Karrde frowned. Then he heard it: a muffled clank from the aft section of the ship. "Should we take a look?" Tapper murmured.

"It would look suspicious if we didn't," Karrde said, grimacing. If this whole thing fell apart through the incompetence of Gamgalon's own people... "Nice and

Moving quietly, they headed down the central corridor to the engine room, hearing another clank as they reached the door. Karrde caught Tapper's eye, nodded. The other nodded back, lowering his bundles to the deck and getting a grip on his blaster. Karrde touched the release, and the door slid open --

The woman sitting on the floor beside the open access panel was young and attractive, with a cascade of red-gold hair tied back out of the way behind her head. Her face was calm and controlled as she looked up at their abrupt entrance; beneath her jumpsuit, her figure was slim and athletic and nicely formed.

And in her hands were a hydrospanner and one of the power flux connectors from the Uwana Buyer's hyperdrive. "Can I help you?" she asked coolly.

"I think you already are," Karrde said, the brief moment of surprise passing into relief. Gamgalon's searchers had not, in fact, fouled up. "I take it you're the hyperdrive mechanic."

"Cleverly deduced," she said. "Celina Marniss. You have any problems?"

"Only with the hyperdrive," Karrde said. "Why, were you expecting me to?"

Celina shrugged, returning her attention to the power flux connector. "I've known some men in my day who didn't think a woman could be decorative and competent at the same time."

"Personally, that's my favorite combination," Karrde told her.

She favored him with a look that was slightly amused, slightly strained-patient. "So you're Syndic Hart. Buzzy was most impressed with you."

"I'm ever so pleased," Karrde said. "I won't ask which way he was impressed." He nodded at the access opening. "Any idea yet what's wrong?"

"Well, for starters, your flux connectors are all about four degrees out of sync," Celina said, hefting the one in her hand. "They have to have been ignored for a long time to drift that far off."

"I see," Karrde said, his favorable first impression of this woman moving up another notch. Chin had assured him that the flux connector gimmicking would take an average hyperdrive mechanic at least a day to find. "I'll have to speak to my maintenance man."

"Personally, I'd fire him," Celina said. "I'll get these readjusted, then we can see what else is wrong."

"Good," Karrde said. "As Buzzy may have mentioned, we're in something of a hurry."

"Funny way to go about it," she said, nodding toward the packages in the corridor behind them. "Gamgalon's safaris usually take upwards of four days."

"It's been my experience that a failed hyperdrive normally takes at least six to ten days to fix," Karrde said.

"Possibly another reason to fire your mechanic," Celina grunted. "I'm guessing I can do it in two or three."

"What makes you think we're going on a safari?" Tapper asked suspiciously.

"The packages, for a start," Celina told him. "Besides, you're obviously well-off, and you talked to Fleck. He's Gamgalon's chief come-up flector -- does his job pretty well." She shrugged, turning her attention back to the flux connector. "Besides, what else is there to do around here?"

"Cleverly deduced," Karrde said. "You're wrong about my personal wealth, though. I'm merely chief purchasing agent for the Sif-Uwana Council."

"I'd call that a marginal distinction," Celina commented. "Certainly given the casual way Sif-Uwanis approach management and money."

"Really," Karrde said, his estimation moving up yet another notch. He would have bet heavily that there wouldn't be a single person on Varonat who'd ever even heard of Sif-Uwana, let alone know anything about it.

"Have you ever been there?"

"Once," Celina said. "It was a few years ago."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Business."

"What sort?"

She lifted an eyebrow at him. "I don't recall an invitation to play Questions Three with you, Syndic."

"No offense intended," Karrde said. "I merely find your presence here intriguing. You seem too skilled and well-traveled to be stuck out here in the backwater of the Ison Corridor. Not to mention your other obvious attributes."

He'd hoped to spark some reaction, to shake up that calm facade of hers a bit. But she refused to turn to the lure. "Maybe I just like the peace and quiet," she countered. "Maybe I'm trying to raise a stake to get out." She locked eyes with him. Green eyes, Karrde noted distantly. A very striking green, at that. "Or maybe I'm hiding from something."

Karrde forced himself to meet that gaze. There was a smoldering, almost bitter fire behind those eyes, driven by a turbulent swirl of emotion. He'd been right: she was no

simple backwater hyperdrive mechanic. "You certainly instill me with confidence," he managed.

The corner of her lip twitched upward in a sardonic smile; and abruptly the fire vanished as if it had never been there. Or had been nothing but an act. "Good," she said briskly. "Maybe next time you'll stay out of your hyperdrive mechanic's way and leave well enough alone."

"I take your point," Karrde said, bowing slightly. "We'll be in the forward living areas if you need to know where anything is. Good evening."

He gestured to Tapper, and together they backed out of the engine room, gathering up their packages again as the door slid closed. "What do you think?" Karrde asked as they headed forward.

"You're right, she doesn't fit here," the other agreed. "One of Gamgalon's people?"

"Probably," Karrde said. "Backup for Fleck, perhaps, or else just a general snoop. Mechanics and other servicepeople tend to be invisible."

"Maybe." Tapper glanced down the corridor behind them. "If you ask me, though, someone of her talents would be wasted in straight surveillance."

"Agreed," Karrde said, pursing his lips. "Could be she doubles as saboteur."

"Or as ship thief," Tapper said grimly. "Gamgalon's covering up something with these safaris."

They'd reached the yacht's lounge now. "Well, he can't steal this one without considerable effort," Karrde reminded him as he dumped his packages on the lounge-couch. "As to sabotage; well, we should be able to ungimmick the hyperdrive in twenty minutes if we have to. And the Wild Karrde can be here in four hours if we need it."

"I take it that means you're still planning to bring a comm-relay along?"

"Very definitely," Karrde assured him. "But I'm not expecting we'll have to use it. My guess is that we're going to find the safaris are just Gamgalon's way of setting up clandestine smuggler meetings, and that Fleck and com-

pany are here to screen out any Imperial officials who might object to the proceedings. Come on, let's get this gear organized. Five-half is going to come early enough as it is."

The rest of the safari was already assembled by the time Karrde and Tapper emerged from the Uwana Buyer just before five-half the next morning. "Eclectic bunch," Tapper commented as they walked toward the group and the three Aratech Arrow-17 airspeeders waiting on the field beside them.

"Agreed," Karrde said, looking them over. A Thennqora, a Saffa, and two Duros, all resplendent in outfits and equipment as obviously fresh out of the box as the gear he and Tapper were wearing. Slightly off to one side, dressed in outfits that had just as obviously seen considerably more use, were a Krish, a Rodian, and Buzzy the laconic Human. "The group matches the escort," he added.

Tapper nodded toward the Krish. "That's not Gamgalon, is it?"

Karrde shook his head. "One of his lieutenants, I think. I doubt Gamgalon himself will be coming along."

"Ah," the Krish called, beaming about as cheerfully as it was physically possible for a Krish to manage as he beckoned toward Karrde and Tapper. "Welcome. You must be Syndic Hart. I am Falmal; I will lead your expedition."

"Pleased to meet you," Karrde nodded. "I trust we're not late?"

"Not at all," Falmal said. "The rest were merely early. May I present your fellow hunters: Tamish --" he gestured to the Thennqora "-- Hav and Jivis --" the Duros "-- and Cob-caree --" the Saffa. "Gentlebeings: Syndic Hart and Captain Seoul of Sif-Uwana."

"Pleased to meet you," Karrde said, eyeing each of the others. None of the names were familiar, but of course

that didn't mean anything. He and Tapper weren't using their correct names, either.

"We waste time," Tamish growled. "Get on with the hunt, Falmal."

"Certainly," Falmal said. "If you will all find seats aboard?"

Karrde and Tapper chose one of the airspeeders and strapped in. A few minutes later Falmal climbed in beside their Krish pilot, and they were off.

"You run these safaris often?" Karrde asked as they flew low above the rippling yellow jungle.

"Only a few times per season." Falmal threw him a speculative look. "You were fortunate indeed to have arrived when you did."

Karrde gestured toward the rack of BlasTech rifles in the back of the airspeeder. "I'll consider it fortunate only if we catch something," he said. "I'm spending far too much money here for just a round-trip tour through a jungle."

"You will be successful," Falmal promised. "All are Rest assured of that."

They flew for an hour before putting down in a hilltop clearing. A small, semi-permanent looking camp had been built there, four buildings grouped around a burned-off landing area. "You must use this place a lot," Karrde commented as they settled to the ground.

"It is the base camp for all safaris," Falmal said. "Here the pilots and airspeeders will wait while we continue on foot. Take your packs and weapons, please. We will move out immediately."

Ten minutes later they were all tromping along a barely discernible path through yellow trees, yellow-green bushes, and a pale violet ground cover that looked disturbingly like masses of fat worms. Falmal was in the lead, with Tamish, Karrde, and Tapper behind him. Buzzy was next, followed by Hav and Jivis and Cob-caree, with the Rodian bringing up the rear.

They traveled for nearly an hour before Falmal called a

break in a small clearing that opened off beside the path. "Bit out of shape for this kind of exercise," Karrde puffed as he got out of his pack and dropped it to the ground. "How far are we going today, Falmal?"

"Wearied so soon?" Falmal asked, throwing a sharp-toothed smile at him. "Not to worry, Syndic Hart. Three hours more, perhaps four, and we will be at the main hunting area."

"Morodins have been here," Tamish grunted from behind him.

Karrde turned to look. The Thennqora was crouched down at the edge of the clearing, prodding with a knife at a patch of dark discoloration cutting across the ground cover. "Morodin slime was here," he said. "Several weeks old."

"Well observed," Falmal said approvingly. "It was two months ago that one of our safaris hunted Morodins through this region. Unfortunately, their migration pattern has since taken them further away."

"Wonder why we didn't land closer to begin with, then," Tapper muttered.

"Perhaps airspeeders spook our intended prey," Karrde suggested, frowning. A meter behind Tamish, along one edge of the slime mark, a neat row of short pinkish shoots was coming up from beneath a group of yellow-green bushes.

And in the shadows behind them was a glint of metal. Stepping around behind Tapper, he started over for a closer look --

"Time to go," Falmal called, slapping his hands briskly. "Packs on, all. We must continue if we are to reach our destination with enough time to begin a hunt."

Karrde considered checking out the metal thing anyway, decided against it, and returned to where he'd left his pack. "You are a botanist, Syndic Hart?" Falmal asked.

"No," Karrde said as Tapper helped him into his pack. "Why?"

"I saw you looking at the Yagaran aleudrupe plants

there," he said, pointing a long finger at the pink shoots. "You will see many such non-native plants in the jungle, I'm afraid -- leavings of previous visitors to the Varonat jungle who were less than careful with their provisions."

"Provisions?" Tapper asked as he got his own pack on.

"Aleudrupe berries are considered a delicacy on many worlds," Falmal said. "Some of those who join our safaris insist on bringing their own provisions. A few carelessly dropped seeds --" He gestured elaborately. "We can only trust that the jungle itself will deal with such intrusions. Come, we must depart."

They didn't spot any more slime remnants before they reached Falmal's chosen camping spot, at least none that Karrde could identify as such. There were no more aleudrupe plants, either. Perhaps after that first time the careless visitors had been warned.

"So," Tapper said, bringing two cups of steaming liquid over to where Karrde had propped himself tiredly against a tree beside their tents. "What do you think of our fellow travelers?"

Karrde looked over at the others, still struggling with the escorts' help to pitch their own shelters. "From the level of complaining during this last hour, I'd say they're exactly what they seem: bored, wealthy beings looking for excitement and somewhat annoyed they're having to work for it."

"Hardly your typical smuggler, in other words."

Karrde shrugged. "Maybe these are semi-legit businessmen Gamgalon wants to make deals with."

"There are a million places in the galaxy he could set up private meetings without this much trouble," Tapper pointed out, sipping at his cup.

"True. Incidentally, did you notice that piece of metal stuck in the ground behind those aleudrupe plants at our first rest stop?"

"Yes," Tapper nodded. "Looked to me like a trans-

pond marker. Probably there either to mark the path or else to keep track of the Morodin migrations."

"Perhaps," Karrde said. "I can't help thinking, though, that Falmal reacted rather strongly when I started toward it."

"You think it's something less innocuous?"

"Could be," Karrde said. "Possibly part of a sensor array to --"

He broke off. Through the trees, from somewhere nearby, came a deep, rumbling growl. Across the encampment, Falmal straightened up as Buzzy and the Rodian unslung their blaster rifles. "This could be it," Karrde murmured; snagging his own weapon and levering himself to his feet. "Falmal?"

"Shh!" the Krish hissed. "You will frighten it. We will break into the same groups of three as in the air-speeders."

He hurried over to Karrde and Tapper as the others collected into their own groups and headed into the jungle. "Come. Quickly and quietly."

They headed out, blaster rifles at the ready. "How can the Morodins get through these trees?" Tapper asked. "I thought they were big."

"Morodins are long but slender," Falmal said, peering carefully through the trees. "They can move easily about the jungle. Ah -- look!"

Karrde swung his blaster rifle around; but Falmal was only pointing at the ground. "Fresh slime trail," the Krish said. "You see?"

"Yes," Karrde said, eyeing the wide silvery line cutting across the ground cover and disappearing off into the trees. A remarkably straight line, too, veering only to get around an occasional tree.

"A large one, too," Falmal said. "Come. We will follow it."

"Doesn't seem very sporting," Tapper grunted as Falmal led the way through the trees.

"The trail will not last long," Falmal said over his shoulder. "It appears and disappears."

Karrde frowned off to his right. It was hard to tell through all the bushes, but -- "Is that another slime trail over there?" he asked Falmal. "Paralleling ours about three meters away"

"Yes, they usually move in pairs," the Krish said.

"Quiet now. See, the trail is turning."

Ahead, the slime trail had turned sharply to the left. Karrde craned his neck; sure enough, the other trail was turning to remain parallel. "That's a pretty sharp angle," Tapper muttered. "You suppose something scared them?"

"Quiet," Falmal said again.

In silence they continued on along the trail. It changed direction twice more in the next few minutes, turns as sharp and precise as the first had been. And then, to Karrde's surprise, it split into two different directions. "How did it do that?" he asked.

"A third Morodin has joined," Falmal said. "Quiet. It could be just ahead."

"Maybe a third, fourth, and fifth," Tapper said, nodding to the right. The paralleling slime trail there had split into three lines, two of them angling off three meters farther along the ground ahead of it. Swallowing, Karrde lifted his blaster rifle and took another step --

And suddenly, there it was: fifteen meters long, rearing the front of its rounded body three meters up off the ground, a mottled yellow creature with spoonbill snout, stubby legs, and wide teeth.

A Morodin.

"Shoot it!" Falmal yelled. "Quickly!"

Karrde's rifle was already against his shoulder, the barrel tracking the huge creature in front of them. The Morodin reared another meter off the ground, giving out the same deep growl they'd heard back at the camp. Karrde squinted down the barrel... "Wait a minute," he told Tapper. "Hold your fire. It's just standing there."

"It is Morodin," Falmal snarled. "Shoot before it's too late."

But it was already too late. From their right came a sudden sputtering volley of blaster fire, catching the Morodin solidly across its flank. Tamish and Cob-caree, with the Rodian behind them, had arrived along one of the lines of the other slime trail. The Morodin growled once more, then toppled to the ground with a thunderous crash.

"Well shot," Falmal all but crowed. "We will summon the airspeeders, and the pilots will prepare your trophy. "Let us return to camp now; the noise will have driven off the others." He looked speculatively at Karrde. "Perhaps tomorrow, Syndic Hart, will be your day for a kill."

"Perhaps," Karrde said, looking at the downed Morodin. So that was that. The big, dangerous Morodin safari... and it had turned out to be no more challenging than shooting a bruallki in a net. "I can hardly wait."

The pilots arrived within an hour, and for nearly two hours afterward the encampment was busy as they shuttled slabs of Morodin meat in from the kill and held interminable conversations with Tamish and Cob-caree as to which would get which part of the head and their preferences in trophy mount and framing. Karrde stayed out of the activity, retreating back to his seat by the tree with a portable melodium and leaving Tapper to handle their share of the work. He overheard one or two rather finely honed comments about poor sportsmanship directed his Way, but he ignored them. Leaning back against the tree, eyes half shut, he let the music from the melodium envelop him.

And, surreptitiously, fiddled with the settings of the comm-relay concealed inside the device.

The sun was dipping low over the forest by the time the pilots finished their work and the airspeeders took off back toward base camp. "I trust you've been enjoying

yourself," Tapper commented, sitting down beside Karrde and wiping his face with the sleeve of his no longer sleek hunter's outfit. "Some of the others think you've been sulking."

"I can't help what they think," Karrde said. "Don't get comfortable; we're going for a walk."

"Wonderful," Tapper groaned, hauling himself back to his feet. "What's the drill?"

"I've been playing a little with the comm-relay," Karrde said, standing up and slinging the melodium's strap over his shoulder. "If Falmal and company have been planting transpond markers in the vicinity, we should be able to pick them up with it. Nice and easy; let's not attract any attention."

They slipped out of camp and headed into the jungle. Karrde's hunch was right: almost immediately the rigged comm-relay found a signal, coming from the direction of the Morodin kill. Following the slime trail again, they soon reached what was left of the carcass, already busy with scavengers.

"There it is," Tapper said, pointing to a group of bushes a few meters away. "It's a transpond marker, all right. And right by one of the slime trails again."

"Yes," Karrde said, kneeling down for a closer look. The ground at the edge of the slime had been freshly turned, he saw. Almost as if something had been planted there...

He looked up sharply, catching Tapper's eye. The other nodded: he'd heard the faint crunching noise, too.

"Coming from the camp," he murmured.

The sound came again. "Let's take the long way." Karrde murmured back, pointing to the section of slime trail Tamish and Cob-caree had arrived along earlier. Explaining to Falmal or his cohorts why he was carrying a melodium on a walk through the jungle could get awkward. Especially if they found the gimmicked comm-relay inside it.

They heard the crunching sound once more as they left

the site, but after that it seemed to fade behind them. Which was just as well. No more than fifteen meters into the jungle, the slime trail broke off; and when it reappeared three meters farther away, it had suddenly sprouted three more branches. "Uh-oh," Tapper muttered. "Which way?"

"I'm not sure," Karrde said, glancing behind them. The thought of a whole herd of Morodins prowling around was not an especially pleasant one. "Let's try this one," he said, pointing to the rightmost of the two trails. "We'll mark one of these trees first so we can backtrack if we have to."

Tapper was staring off into the jungle. "Let's try going a little farther in first," he suggested slowly. "We can always come back."

Karrde frowned at him. "Something?"

"A hunch," Tapper said. "Just a hunch."

Karrde pursed his lips. "How far in do you want to go?"

"About three hundred meters," Tapper said. "I remember a ridge in that direction on the map that overlooks a sort of wide depression in the ground."

Karrde grimaced. Three hundred meters in an unfamiliar jungle was nothing to be taken lightly. But on the other hand, Tapper's infrequent hunches were nearly always worth following up. "All right," he said. "But no farther than the ridge. And we head back sooner if our trail ends."

"Agreed. Let's go."

The slime trail split again a few meters along, and twice more made one of those short, three-meter breaks with new branches going off in different directions when it resumed. For a while Karrde tried to keep track of the number of lines, hoping to figure out how many animals they were dealing with here. But he soon gave up the effort. If the Morodins decided to get nasty, the difference between six and sixty of them would be largely academic.

"There's the ridge," Tapper said, pointing ahead at a

last line of trees that seemed to open onto blue sky. "Let's take a look."

They stepped forward and between the trees. There stretched out perhaps 100 meters below them, was the wide valley-like depression Tapper had described.

And gathered together at one side of it were upwards of fifty Morodins.

"We've found the crowd, all right," Karrde muttered uneasily. The slope down from their ridge into the valley was mildly steep, but he doubted it would bother something with the size and musculature of a Morodin. In fact he knew it wouldn't; the slime trail they were following rounded the ridge and continued down without a break

"Don't look at the Morodins," Tapper said. "Look at the slime trails."

"What about them?"

"Look at them," Tapper urged. "Tell me you see it too."

Karrde frowned, wondering what he was getting at. The whole depression was full of the lines, that was for sure clearly visible between the trees and over the trampled bushes. Lots of lines, showing the same bends and branches as the ones they'd encountered up here...

And then, abruptly, he got it. "I don't believe it," he breathed.

"I didn't either," Tapper said. "Look -- one of them trying it."

One of the Morodins had detached himself from the group and into the three-meter channel between two of the trails. Waddling quickly on those short legs, it move to the first bend and turned to the left.

Into the first section of the elaborately constructed maze.

"Let's get back," Karrde said, shaking his head in disbelief. "I have a feeling we don't want Gamgalon's people finding us here."

"Too late," a soft voice said.

Carefully, Karrde looked over his shoulder. Two meter

behind him stood Falmaal and two of the Krish pilots, all three with blaster rifles at the ready. Behind them stood a fourth Krish, gazing thoughtfully at him. "Indeed," Karrde said, lowering the muzzle of his own rifle and turning around to face them. "Well. At least we shouldn't have any trouble finding the way back to camp."

"Whether we return to camp directly has yet to be decided," the fourth Krish said in that same soft voice. "Put your weapons down, please. And tell me what you are doing here."

"We were looking for Morodins," Karrde said as he and Tapper lowered their blaster rifles to the ground. "In the process we stumbled on the fact that they're more than just simple animals." He cocked an eyebrow.

"They're fully sentient beings, aren't they, Gamgalon?"

The Krish smiled. "Very good," he said. "On both counts. You know my name; what is yours?"

Under the circumstances, there didn't seem to be much point in continuing the masquerade. "Talon Karrde," Karrde identified himself. "This is my associate, Quelev Tapper."

Faalmaal hissed. "Was it not as I said, my liege?" he snarled. "Smugglers. And spies."

"So it would appear," Gamgalon said. "Why are you here, Talon Karrde?"

"Curiosity," Karrde said. "I've heard stories about these safaris of yours. I wanted to find out what was going on."

"And have you?"

"You're hunting sentient beings," Karrde said. "In violation of Imperial law. Even in these days, I imagine What's left of the Empire would deal rather harshly with you if they knew that."

Gamgalon smiled again. "You imagine wrongly. As it happens, the Imperial governor in charge of Varonat is fully aware of what is happening here. His portion of the earnings are quite adequate to insure that there are no such questions about the hunts."

Karrde frowned. "Surely you're not bribing an Imperial governor with scraps from safari tickets."

"Indeed not," Gamgalon said. "But as the safaris provide ideal cover for our planting and harvesting operations, it is in his best interests to allow them to continue"

"You're not bribing him with aleudrupe berries, either," Tapper put in. "You can buy those things on the open market for thirty or forty a packload."

"Ah -- but not these aleudrupe berries," Gamgalon said smugly. "This particular crop is grown in soil saturated with Morodin slime... and during their growth, these berries undergo an extremely interesting chemical change."

"Such as?"

Falmal hissed again. "My liege -- ?"

"Do not worry," Gamgalon soothed him. "Consider Talon Karrde, a merchant ship carrying three cargoes to a politically tense world: rethan-K, promhassic triaxli, and aleudrupe berries. All harmless, all legal, none worth so much as a raised voice from either Imperial customs or officials of the New Republic. The ship is sent on its way to the surface, where it is greeted enthusiastically by its customers.

"Who, a scant hour later, will be launching an attack on their political or military enemies. With weapons utilizing a blaster formulation fully as powerful as spin-sealed Tibanna gas."

Karrde stared at him, a hard lump forming in his stomach. "The berries are a catalyst?"

"Excellent," Gamgalon said approvingly. "Falmal was right -- you are indeed clever enough to be dangerous. To be precise, it is the pits of the berries that create this new gas from the rethan and promhassic. The fruit itself is perfectly normal, and can stand up to any chemical test.

"And the safaris mask both the planting and the harvesting," Karrde nodded. "With the transpond marker there to help you find the crops again after you've

planted them. All the profits of weapons smuggling, with none of the risks."

"You understand," Gamgalon beamed. "And thus you must also understand why we can't allow any hint of this to leak out."

He gestured, and one of the Krish pilots stepped forward, bending awkwardly down to pick up the blaster rifles Karrde and Tapper had dropped. "Certainly I understand," Karrde said. "Perhaps we could discuss an arrangement? My organization --"

"There will be no discussion," Gamgalon said. "And my arrangements are my own. This way, please." The pilot straightened up, gestured to the side with Karrde's rifle--

And suddenly Tapper's hands snapped out, plucking the rifle from the pilot's hands and jabbing the muzzle hard into the Krish's torso. Diving into the cover of the nearest tree, he swung the rifle back toward Falmal and Gamgalon --

And dropped spinning to the ground as a pair of blaster bolts slashed through him from down the ridge to his right. A single shuddering gasp, and he lay still.

"I trust, Talon Karrde," Gamgalon said into the brittle silence, "that you will not be so foolish as to similarly resist."

Karrde lifted his eyes from Tapper's crumpled figure, to see the third Krish pilot step out of concealment along the ridge, his rifle steady on Karrde's chest. "Why shouldn't I?" he demanded, his voice sounding ugly in his ears. "You're going to kill me anyway, aren't you?"

"Do you choose to die here?" Gamgalon countered. "This way, please."

Karrde took a deep breath. Tapper dead; Karrde himself unarmed and alone. Completely alone -- even the Morodins down below had vanished, apparently scattering at the sound of the blaster fire.

But, no, he didn't wish to die here. Not when there was any chance at all that he could live long enough to avenge

Tapper's death. "All right," he sighed. Two of the pilots stepped forward and took his arms, and together they all set off.

Karrde hadn't expected them to take him back to the encampment, and they didn't. From the direction Falmal was leading them, it looked like they were heading toward one of the other clearings they'd passed just before setting up camp. Undoubtedly where Gamgalon's airspeeder was waiting. "What sort of distribution setup do you have?" he asked.

"I have no need of assistance," Gamgalon said, looking back over his shoulder. "As I have said already."

"My organization could still be useful to you," Karrde pointed out. "We have contact people all over the -- "

"You will be silent," Gamgalon cut him off.

"Gamgalon, listen --"

And from behind him came a deep, rumbling growl. A growl that was echoed an instant later from both sides.

The group came to a sudden halt. "Falmal?" Gamgalon snapped. "What is this? Why are there Morodins here?"

"I do not know," Falmal said, an uneasiness in his voice. "This is not at all like them."

The growls came again, from what seemed to be the same positions. "Maybe they've finally gotten tired of being the prey," Karrde said, looking around. "Maybe they've decided to hold a safari of their own."

"Nonsense," Falmal bit out. But he was looking around, too. And he was starting to tremble. "My liege, I suggest we move on. Quickly."

The roars came again. "Falmal, take the prisoner, Gamgalon ordered, his voice suddenly grim as he pulled blaster from beneath his tunic. "You others: to the side and rear. Shoot anything you see."

Warily, the three pilots spread out into the jungle blaster rifles held high. Falmal stepped to Karrde's side closed a tense hand around his arm. "Quickly," he hissed.

Gamgalon stepped to Karrde's other side, and together the three of them hurried forward. Ahead, through the trees, Karrde could see the glinting of sunlight from an airspeeder. Another chorus of Morodin roars came, all from behind them this time. They reached the last line of trees, stepping into the clearing --

And with a gasping sigh Falmaal suddenly released Karrde's arm and stumbled to sprawl on the ground, a knife hilt protruding from his side. Gamgalon snarled and spun around, his blaster searching for a target.

He never made it. Even as Karrde reflexively ducked to the side, the Krish's tunic erupted in a brief burst of flame as a quiet blaster shot caught him neatly in the center of his torso. He fell backward to the ground and lay still.

Karrde turned; but it was not one of his fellow hunters whom he saw emerging from the cover of the tree they'd just passed. "Don't just stand there," Celina Marniss growled, lowering the tiny blaster in her hand as she passed him and headed toward the airspeeder. "My airspeeder's too far away -- we'll take theirs. Unless you want to be here when those other Krish catch up."

"Nicely done," Karrde commented as the Uwana Buyer cut through Varonat's upper atmosphere toward deep space. "Nicely done indeed. Though I must confess a certain disappointment that it wasn't actually the Morodins finally taking their vengeance."

Beside him, Celina snorted under her breath. "Considering that they probably can't tell a Human from a Krish, let alone one Human from another, you should count yourself lucky it wasn't them. They'd have ground you into the dirt along with Gamgalon and his crew."

"Most likely," Karrde conceded. "Where did you get the recordings of Morodin growls?"

"Gamgalon took me along on one of his safaris once,"

Celina said. "Back when he still thought he might have a chance of recruiting me into his organization."

"So you weren't working for him. We'd wondered about that."

"I don't like Krish," she said flatly. "Even honest ones can't be trusted very far, and Gamgalon hardly qualifies as honest. Besides, all he wanted me to do was play space-port spy for him. Not much future in that."

"Not anymore," Karrde agreed. "So as long as you were out in the jungle anyway, you went ahead and recorded some Morodin growls?"

She shrugged. "I thought it might be handy to have something like that on file. Turns out I was right." She threw him a look. "You owe me for those three recorders, by the way. Those things don't come cheap."

"I owe you for considerably more than that," Karrde reminded her soberly. "Why did you follow us out there, anyway?"

"Oh, come now," she scoffed. "Hart and Seoul? Not to mention a-ship called the Uwana Buyer? It was all just a little too cute; and I remembered hearing about a smuggler chief who had a fondness for cute wordplay. So I took a chance."

"And it paid off," Karrde said. "You've earned a considerable reward. Just name it."

She turned to look at him with those green eyes of hers. "I want a job," she said.

Karrde frowned. It hadn't been the response he'd expected. "What kind of job?"

"Any kind," she said. "I can pilot, fight, play come-up-flector --"

"Hyperdrive mechanic?"

"That, too," Celina said. "Anything you've got, I can learn it." She took a deep breath, let it out. "I just want to get back into mainstream society again."

Karrde cocked an eyebrow. "You have a strange view of smuggling if you consider it mainstream society."

"Trust me," she said grimly. "Compared with some of what I've done, it is."

"I don't doubt it," Karrde said, studying her face. A very striking face, with a striking body to go with it. Decorative and competent both; his favorite combination. "All right," he said. "You've got yourself a deal. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you," she said. "You won't regret hiring me."

"I'm sure I won't." He smiled slightly. "And since we're now officially working together --" he held out his hand. "You can call me Talon Karrde."

She smiled tightly as she took his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Talon Karrde," she said. "You can call me Mara Jade."